

# A home of her own

by Linda Dawe with Janet Klees

Linda Dawe is Tiffany's mother and Janet Klees has been coordinator with the family-governed Deohaeko Support Network for the past 15 years and has been deeply affected by the lives of the people that she has come to know. Janet is the author of two books which are directly rooted in the Deohaeko experience, ("We Come Bearing Gifts; Our Presence has Roots") as well as numerous other reports, documents, tools, and writings. Janet also works closely with other Scarborough, Ontario families, and several family groups and projects across Durham Region. All of Janet's work focuses on individually-designed arrangements and she is especially concerned that families are well-supported to think through practical, principled ways to ensure that their family members live meaningful, involved and secure lives within their communities. Her work is rooted in a social role valorization frame work and she is involved with valued-based initiatives, writing, and training across the GTA, Ontario, throughout Canada, and internationally as well.

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Tiffany Dawe

**T**iffany Dawe is a Canadian woman in her thirties who has had a home of her own within the Rougemount housing co-operative for the past 15 years. She is an artist who works in natural watercolours and increasingly in vivid, lively acrylics on larger and larger canvases. She is a long-time environmentalist as head of the Butterfly Garden in the Rouge Valley, home of the largest urban park in North America. Tiffany also volunteers with the local pioneer museum, sits on the local art guild, is an active church member and supporter of her church choir.

At Rougemount, Tiffany is known as a great host to many parties, events and gatherings. Along with other co-operative members she upholds Rougemount's tradition of being good neighbours to one another, thereby creating an intentional community of possibility and welcome. Tiffany has often, but not always, shared her bright, spacious three-bedroom apartment with a room mate – typically, a young working woman of her own age who pays her share of the rent and shares time and

space with Tiffany in natural and unpaid ways.

Tiffany graciously embraces the support of her parents, dear friends, and others in paid and unpaid roles to help her build and maintain a home that reflects her truest nature and is a stepping stone to the rest of her life. This support looks natural and comfortable, and yet is intricately planned to ensure that Tiffany is safe, well and actively involved in her life.

Tiffany is a woman who does not speak, and requires a significant amount of thoughtful and sensitive support for almost all aspects of her personal grooming, her diabetes and other health-related care, the planning of her day, moving around her community, contact with others, and all of her household management. In getting to know Tiffany, both paid and unpaid assistants and support people come to understand how she communicates and thereby directs her own support in many ways.

Tiffany and her family are one of seven families that form Deohaeko Support Network, a family-governed individualized and supportive network in Pickering, Ontario. The families initially came

together about twenty years ago to think about how and where their adult sons and daughters with disabilities would live in the future. Since that time, they designed and had built a 105-unit housing co-operative that is now home to about 225 ordinary people looking for housing



in the region. Most, but not all, of the seven individuals who receive support have chosen to call this co-operative home. The families form a tight, supportive and thoughtful unit as they continue to plan and figure out both day-to-day life and the future for and with their sons and daughters and each of their circles or networks. At the same time, the seven individuals live very separate and unique lives – each with homes of their own, their own separate support funding, various support arrangements and a variety of ways that they choose to be connected with their neighbours and greater community.

Linda, Tiffany's mother is a thoughtful woman who maintains the vision of a good life for and with Tiffany. She has many wise and insightful thoughts to share about the impact of how home and support work for Tiffany and those around her.

### **What does Tiffany's home and lifestyle mean for her?**

I think Tiffany's home means several very important things. First of all, a home of her own means ownership for Tiffany and this has a ripple effect in her life. When people have their own home, it enhances their competency and their confidence. This is very evident for Tiffany – people see her as more competent, and she has grown in her confidence as she receives and welcomes friends, guests and visitors into her home.

Secondly, having a home of her own allows Tiffany to live her own life more fully. She loves people to come into her home, her space. Having her own place allows this to happen. It cannot happen in

a group home, in her parent's home or even in a shared arrangement, but it can happen in a home that is fully hers. She can invite and entertain and celebrate and welcome as much or as little as she likes. People can't really interfere with that.

Another thing is that Tiffany has her own belongings around her and her home is truly hers. That's huge. When you live some place and the things around are not really yours, you feel some

restrictions on using it – even if it is living with family, or someone of your choice. For Tiffany, right now, it all belongs to her and she decides where to put things, and what to have around her.

Living as she does gives Tiffany all kinds of freedoms she would not otherwise have. She can decide to do something or to do nothing. She decides how to use the rooms she has. For example, she is currently using the spare bedroom as a small art gallery. She decides on décor and furnishings – with the same financial limitations and possibilities that any of us on a fixed income feel. She decides when and how often to have shower, do the laundry or just hang out. Although daily life falls into a pattern that makes sense for her, she can change her mind about doing any of those day-to-day things in her home as she feels like it.

### **What has Tiffany gained from her home and lifestyle?**

Well for one thing, she does not have to live with her parents! As much as she loves us, it is clear that she loves to live away, fairly independent of us. Of course, because she requires assistance with many things, she now, in some respects, relies more upon other people than she used to, but interdependence with a wider circle of people gives her a much greater sense of independence overall. Also, just to be absolutely clear – people who support Tiffany do so at her direction, relying on her for advice, guidance and detailed feedback.

And she has gained in many other ways as well. She has more excitement in her life, more fun, more freedom, more opportunity to welcome

other people and be welcomed. In addition, she has influences from a wider range of people, and therefore she has tried things her father and I could not have thought of. She has relationships with other people that are separate from her parents.

It is also very obvious that others have also gained by Tiffany's presence in our co-operative and community. Because of Tiffany and the kind of home that she wants to have, other people have had lots of fun, good food and companionship. They have shared in her excitement in the ordinary, wonderful things in life. They have gained insight and understanding of how Tiffany can live in her own home well. I think that many people feel better about themselves

by being a part of Tiffany's life. They are involved in giving and receiving and that just feels right. They gain a deep understanding that if we can figure things out for Tiffany to live well, we can do so for almost anyone. This expands people's ideas of community and what is possible.

I think that Tiffany also contributes much to her neighbours, friends and family. She always takes up opportunities to be a good co-op member and neighbour. She chats and keeps up with her neighbours, attends regular co-operative meetings, and helps to plan and attend social events.

She greets visitors and others in the lobby and shows them the friendly, welcoming face of her community. With her family, Tiffany is usually kind, cheerful and thoughtful. She is patient when life is imperfect and things need to happen in unusual or unexpected ways. This attitude contributes to our ability to figure out the problems – Tiffany keeps us focused. Her friends know that a greeting from Tiffany is a hearty, joyous welcome that they receive from no other. To be chosen by Tiffany in this way feels like an honour and a blessing.

## What does having a home of her own mean for the rest of Tiffany's life?

Tiffany shows us that living in her own home in this way is very satisfying for her. It provides her with variety and access to many things just as they happen. Each day is different from the one before, and yet there is a strong of rhythm so that much is also familiar and knowable and something to look forward to.

Having her own home in this way means that Tiffany can live in similar ways to many other people. Like other women of her own age across the city, she can have a good deal of control over many aspects of her life. She can share her home, her

space with others, and her time as she chooses. She can stop and start things, and try out many different opportunities as they come across her path.

I think that having her own home also keeps Tiffany safe from less desirable situations. If others think that she just occupies a bed, then that can happen in

many places. But if she can keep her home, and others see her as having a home of her own, then no one will say she has to go someplace else.

When other people see Tiffany in her own home in many ordinary ways, they can imagine how she could then be a part of the rest of her community in similar ways. It begins at home. When home is typical and makes sense for people, they can believe that it works in similar ways beyond her home.

Finally, I think that Tiffany having and fully enjoying a home of her own is inspiring for other people, especially families. When people see that a home and this lifestyle are possible for Tiffany, they begin to believe it can be possible for anybody. When people first see Tiffany, they cannot immediately see her gifts and competencies, and yet they see that life is working well for her. When they begin to see that it works because we focus on her interests, passions and gifts, they realize that this can be done for and with anybody. That is the power of a good model and Tiffany provides this for many people.

